

Binghamton (NY) Press & Sun Bulletin

EDITORIAL

Heating up Global warming can't be ignored

July 8, 2006

There has been much debate lately on whether global warming is a genuine concern. Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-New Hartford, believes firmly that it is.

Last year, Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, requested an investigation into the work of three climate scientists (Drs. Michael Mann, Raymond Bradley and Malcolm Hughes) who conducted an influential study on the topic. Barton's request was spurred by an article in the Wall Street Journal challenging their results -- called the "hockey stick" paper (so named because a chart of their data showing a rise in annual temperatures since the year 1000 resembles one). He demanded that the scientists provide their raw data and other findings used to support their claim, plus supply information on "all grants and all other funding given for research in the area of climate."

Boehlert, chairman of the House Science Committee, responded angrily to Barton's unusual demands. He wrote "The precedent your investigation sets is truly chilling. Are scientists now supposed to look over their shoulders to determine if their conclusions might prompt a congressional inquiry no matter how legitimate their work? If Congress wants public policy to be informed by scientific research, then it has to allow that research to operate outside the political realm. Your inquiry seeks to erase that line between science and politics." He also commissioned the National Academies of Science to gather the consensus of leading scientists on the scientists' work.

On June 22, the NAS returned its findings, saying that with the "highest confidence" it would agree that "recent warmth is unprecedented for at least the last 400 years." Although the scientists could say with less confidence that the same is true if you go back to the time period between 900 and 1600, "the available proxy evidence does indicate that many locations were warmer during the past 25 years than during any other 25-year period since 900."

In response to these findings, Boehlert said "There is nothing in this report that should raise any doubts about the broad scientific consensus on global climate change." The report scores a victory for that issue as well as for the importance of keeping "political interference" out of the scientific process -- from either side of the discussion. There remains a great deal unknown about climate change, and simply assuming that man-made influences are the sole or primary cause is just as bad as simply dismissing the whole notion of global warming.

It would be good if Congress and the rest of the country heeded the findings of the NAS and agreed that this is a serious issue that must be addressed. Instead of shooting the messenger, as in Barton's thinly veiled attempt, lawmakers must weigh the scientific data carefully outside the reach of energy corporation interests or radical environmentalists.

Still, it would be wiser to overestimate global warming's threat than risk underestimating it. Al Gore's film on global warming, "An Inconvenient Truth," may be too politicized for some tastes, but it's certainly an impetus for national and international discussion on a matter of global interest.